

**Testimony on House Bill 5016 (Sections 74-82)**  
**Serafín Méndez-Mendez, Ph.D.**

Good Evening. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to testify today. I am Serafin Méndez and I am a professor of communication at Central Connecticut State University. For the last 11 years, I have also been consulting and volunteering at Parents Opening Doors, Inc. Our organization was founded in 1986 by a group of Connecticut parents and professional to provide advocacy and training to parents of children with disabilities and mental health issues. Each year our combined branches and satellites serve more than 2,000 families of children with disabilities and mental health issues. We have branches across the state.

Since our inception, we have received a great deal of technical assistance, training and support from the Office of Protection and Advocacy. In fact, they continue to provide us with space, phone and a myriad of other resources that are critical if we are going to continue fulfilling our mission.

I have serious concerns about this the rationale behind this bill and its potential impact of thousands of people with special needs and disabilities. I will list them quickly:

1. There is no other office or state entity prepared to conduct the abuse investigations that are now conducted by the OPA. Although the mission the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities is "to eliminate discrimination through civil and human rights law enforcement and to establish equal opportunity and justice for all persons within the state through advocacy and education" the focus of CHRO has been on employment issues and safeguarding the rights of a protected class of individuals. OPA focus is on abuse. As we know, they have a significant backlog of cases and their advocacy efforts are more educational in nature than interventional. This bill will eliminate approximately 11 positions throughout OPA and I am not certain that CHRO has the resources to supplement or make up for this.
2. Despite years of serious work in bringing down barriers for people with disabilities, much work needs to be done. There is a significant series of dysfunctions in institutions such as the school districts, the Department of Families and Children and even the Department of Social Services. They are more often barriers to prevent abuse than facilitators... Each year OPA assist us in conducting scores of investigations and eradicate abuse towards children with disabilities. We have never received any assistance from those institutions in conducting investigations to prevent abuse. If there is a rationale behind this bill that those organizations are prepared to take over those responsibilities, it is flawed.
3. A significant amount of the enforcement and advocacy work conducted by OPA is defrayed by federal funds. The proposed reorganization of this agency puts these funds at risk and jeopardizes the work done by the Council on Developmental Disabilities and UCONN's Center for Excellence. Is the legislature ready, willing and able to replace the funding that OPA receives with state funds?
4. Throughout the years, OPA has been instrumental in empowering a community of people with disabilities. They currently host four community based agencies (independent 501 ©3s) that do extensive work on behalf of people with disabilities. This bill will most likely force us out and will force us in incurring significant operational expenses. To many of these organizations that will represent their organizational death. Through our advocacy work, we empower individuals with disabilities and give them a voice and an education to know the law and advocate for themselves. If CHRO and OPA were to be merged, those voices will most likely be silenced.

In sum, this bill is a very bad idea. If something is not broken, please don't try to fix it.